

The Power of the Cross
A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First Corinthians 1:18-31
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There is an old saying, which I am sure you've heard, which says "A picture is worth a thousand words." I think I first heard that from my first grade teacher, Ms. Taylor. A picture is worth a thousand words. Well, I am trying to start a new saying and that is: "A bumper sticker is worth an entire sermon." I have talked about bumper stickers before from this pulpit because I really believe there is a sermon in each one, and by the way, a sermon, or at least a Rich Holmes sermon is about 2000 to 2500 words, so for those of you who are doing the math, that makes a bumper sticker worth two to two and a half pictures, if a picture is only worth a thousand words.

Well, a couple of years ago, I saw a bumper sticker that says this: "The big bang theory: God said it and 'Bang!' it happened."

Now, whenever I see a bumper sticker on someone's car I always want to follow the person home and ask them why they have that bumper sticker and what they're trying to say, but I think we have some idea of what the motorists who has this one is trying to say. On one hand, maybe they are trying to say they don't believe in the big bang theory. They believe that God literally made the world in six days, or on the other hand maybe they are saying they accept that the big bang theory might be true, but they want to remind everyone that even if the universe started with a bang, God was the real creator of the universe.

But whatever the motorists who has this bumper sticker is trying to say, there is something appealing about it, isn't there? And what is that? What is it that is so appealing? Well, I think it is the idea that God goes "Bang!"

Going “Bang!” seems like a God thing to do after all, because God is a powerful being, we even say God is *all* powerful. And that brings me to our New Testament passage today from First Corinthians. Because here, the author, the apostle Paul talks about the power of God and says “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” I find it interesting that the word Paul uses in this passage for power is *dynamis*, from which we get the word dynamite. And that, I think is how we often think of God’s power: raw energy, destructive energy, the power of dynamite that can tear down buildings and bridges and open holes in mountains, the kind of power that goes “Bang!”

When I was a kid of about seven or eight, I remember I used to enjoy putting on puppet shows for an audience of two whole people, both of whom were my parents. Now, this was a long time ago, and I don’t remember what all these puppet shows were about, but I do remember that one time, I put on a sort of passion play for my parents. I put on a whole play about the events leading up to our Lord’s crucifixion and death and his resurrection on the third day. But you see my version of our Lord’s passion was a little different, because in my version, the first thing Jesus did when he got up out of the tomb on Easter Sunday is that he went out and hunted down all the people who had him crucified and he killed them. Now, I can tell you that normally these dramas that I put on were received by a very polite and receptive audience, but I soon found that my puppets were performing for a pretty tough crowd for this passion play. My mother, I can remember, spoke up and said, “Now son, I don’t seem to remember Jesus killing anyone!” But I was adamant. “Oh yes he did mom. Yes he did.” I said, “He killed all those bad people who had him crucified!” Now, I am sure that no one had ever told me that Jesus ever killed anyone, so why was I so adamant about this at the age of eight? Why did I

insist that this was true? Well, I guess because at that age that was the only thing that could possibly make sense to me. That was the gospel according to eight year old Rich Holmes and that was the only story that could possibly be the gospel for me as a young child.

Well, if today I had the same mentality as I did when I was eight, I am sure I would not have seen anything odd in what the apostle Paul tells us in today's New Testament reading. For in today's reading, the apostle Paul associates the message of the cross with the power of God, and if I thought now the way I thought then, I would say "Of course, the cross is all about power. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried and on the third day he rose again from the dead and got even. Power, revenge, dynamis, dynamite!" But of course, the cross is not about revenge and dynamite. It is a display of love and mercy and grace, I would tell you it is the ultimate display of love and mercy and grace.

But what about power, could the cross in some way, in some way also be about power? If I tell you that you have a certain power, or that you are powerful, what do I mean? Well, if you have a power, of course you have an ability, you have an ability to create an event or to make something happen, like the power to raise your hand or lift your foot. But having a certain power does not necessarily make you powerful. We might call a judge or a king or a general powerful, but we would not call everyone who can simply raise their hands or feet *powerful*, even though they have certain powers. We say that someone is powerful when they have the ability to do something that makes a big impact on the world or on other people's lives. Being able to raise your hand is a power but it alone doesn't make you *powerful* unless by raising your hand you can do something like command an army because raising your hand all by itself usually doesn't make a big impact on the world or on other people's lives.

So who is powerful? Well, sometimes those who are powerful are those with the power to make things go “Bang!”—those whose power is backed up by the barrel of a gun, and in different ways a judge and a king and a general have this kind of power. But not everyone we think of as powerful at least in my mind has this kind of power, not everyone who is powerful has the *dynamis* of dynamite. That’s not the kind of power that Rosa Parks and Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King had. That’s not the kind of power that Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Oscar Romero showed the world. **I wouldn’t have called these people powerful when I was eight, but I would certainly call them powerful now. What I would say now is that not all the important power in this world goes “Bang!” and not all the important power comes out of the barrel of a gun. Some of it comes through the ability to resist hate with love, to resist wrath with gentleness or to resist violence with nonviolence.**

Well, I think it is clear that this is the kind of power Jesus displayed on the cross, it is clear that the power he displayed was the power of love resisting hate and gentleness resisting wrath and non-violence resisting violence. I didn’t understand that back when I talked about Jesus hunting down and killing everyone who had him crucified, but I understand that now. But while that is the kind of power on display on the cross, what does the cross tell us about God? When we talk about God being Almighty or all powerful should we understand ourselves to be talking about the power of the cross? Should we understand ourselves to be talking about the power of love and gentleness and non-violence or the power of generals and kings and dynamite?

I don’t know. I have no doubt that some of the time when we talk about God’s power we are talking about the power that goes “Bang!” and when I count the number of stars in the sky on a clear night, or when I consider how God made natural wonders like the Grand Canyon or

Niagra Falls or the Himalayas, this is the kind of power I think about. For all I know some of God's power, maybe most of God's power is the power of a general or a king, the kind of power that goes "Bang!" the I thought about as a kid. But I also think there is nothing unique about believing in a God with that kind of power. People who believe in a God with that kind of power are a dime a dozen. The cross is about something different. Christ came to show the world a different way.

At the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. there are flags flying inside this sacred place of worship from all fifty states, and there are also flags which fly for important people from each of those states. One of the flags which flies from the state of Georgia is for a man named Robert Alston. Robert Alston was from Atlanta and he owned all the land which is now the East Lake Golf and Country club in Atlanta. He was also a member of the Georgia legislature, and he tried to use his influence in that body for all that was good and right and merciful.

In that effort, Mr. Alston believed it was his duty to stand up against a practice that was deeply offensive to him. It was a custom back then for wealthy people in the state of Georgia to use prisoners to work on their plantations or their mansions. All you had to do was provide them lunch. You did not have to house those workers. You did not have to pay them a wage. You did not have to provide insurance. You just had to feed them lunch. Some of the finest homes in Atlanta were built on the backs of prisoners who were hauled out of prison to work all day under the scorching southern sun for nothing more than the wage of a lunch. Robert Alston said "This is wrong. This is worse than slavery." He spoke to the other members of the Georgia Legislature, but none of them seemed to care. They were making money and their rose gardens were blooming because of this custom.

So, one day, Mr. Alston said “Tomorrow I am going to introduce a bill in the legislature to outlaw this practice.” The next morning he came into the state capitol with his bill. A fellow legislator from a wealthy Georgia family came up to him and said “Robert, are you going to introduce your bill today?” Alston said “Yes.” So the other legislator took out a pistol and shot Robert Alston dead.

The kind of power that Robert Alston demonstrated, and the kind of power whom all of those who have stood up for justice and mercy and peace in this world have demonstrated is not the only kind of power in the universe. But it is a different kind of power from what this world is accustomed to. It is the kind of power that makes the God we worship as Christians different from all the other so called gods out there.

“God said it and ‘Bang!’ it happened.” That is one kind of power in the universe, and it may be one kind of power that God has. But it is not the kind of power that makes us any different from anyone else in the world, and I believe this world is looking for something different.